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ABSTRACT

The use of blue ribbon commissions for higher education planning is discussed, and 25 reports produced by blue ribbon commissions in 23 states between January 1981 and March 1986 are reviewed. Blue ribbon commissions are established for a fixed duration to study a specific problem and are composed of eminent individuals from a variety of backgrounds. The commission is provided with a staff and funds to fulfill its charge. A blue ribbon commission may be appointed to gain consensus for a major change, or to bring public attention to important issues, or to deal with a crisis, whether actual or impending. Analysis of recommendations from 26 blue ribbon commission reports indicates that the largest number concerned governance and finance. Most governance recommendations reaffirmed the existing structure or suggested minor changes, while the majority of financial recommendations dealt with examination of funding formulas and/or asked for an increase in the amount of money appropriated to higher education in that state. Fifteen additional types of recommendations are identified along with the frequency of each type. A brief summary of Maryland's past and current experience with blue ribbon commissions is provided as an advance warning to those who anticipate a blue ribbon commission in their state. (SW)

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THE LATEST HIGHER EDUCATION FIX-IT:

THE BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION

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THE LATEST HIGHER EDUCATION FIX-IT:

THE BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION

In the last five years, there has been an enormous amount of state-level activity in higher education. There are a variety of reasons for this. Some of the attention is a spillover from recent national and state efforts to reform elementary and secondary education. Critical national reports have provided the impetus, and occasionally substance, for the debate on the quality of higher education in the United States (NIE Study Group, 1984). In many states, public and political attention moved easily and naturally from schools to campuses.

Second, limited state resources have created enormous pressure on governors and legislatures to assure the effective and efficient expenditure of state funds (Ewell, 1985). Supported by staff members who are more numerous and better trained than a decade ago, state legislators and officials are anxious to gain more control over escalating costs, to eliminate what they see as duplication, and to target what funds are available to very selected areas.

Related to concerns over mounting costs is a general pressure for increased accountability. Starting earlier in the decade, states responded by adopting testing programs for elementary and secondary school students and teachers and setting statewide graduation standards. Higher education institutions

are now faced with similar proposals, from rising junior exams to broad-based assessment programs.

A fourth reason for the current attention to the quality of higher education is our near-national-obsession with regaining the economic competitive edge the U.S. has enjoyed for so many years. Economic vitality has been closely linked with the quality and vitality of postsecondary education. Higher education has an important role to play in educating a highly skilled work force and in producing new knowledge which can be the basis for technological advances.

Thus, for these reasons, and occasionally others, many states have set about examining their current investments in higher education and planning improvements. An approach favored by many states is the establishment of a blue-ribbon commission. This paper discusses the use of such commissions for higher education planning over the last five years and reviews their recommendations to get a flavor of the issues they struggled with and the solutions they proposed.

The Blue-Ribbon Commission as a Planning Device

States have used a variety of structures to deal with higher education problems and planning. Following massive expansion of higher education in the 1950's and 60's, most states created a higher education agency for coordination and planning. By 1972, 47 states had established either consolidated governing boards responsible for all senior institutions or coordinating boards responsible for statewide planning and coordination of two or

more governing boards (McGuinness, 1986 (b)). In the course of their work, a number of these agencies produce statewide master plans and regular and special reports.

Even when the state agency staff is sufficient in number and skill to produce needed studies, states have used other planning mechanisms--experts, either local or national; legislative or executive task forces; or blue-ribbon commissions--to help them deal with complex, and often politically charged, problems. The Education Commission of the States reports that 11 studies by legislative committees, 10 by state agencies and/or consultants, and 37 by special study commissions have been completed or are in progress since 1980 (McGuinness, 1986 (a)). It is this last planning mechanism, especially the "blue-ribbon" study commission, with which this paper deals.

The blue-ribbon commission approach to higher education planning is not new. Since 1929, there have been more than 50 such commissions at the national level alone (Johnson & Marcus, 1986) and, as we have already seen, there has been a growing reliance on the commission approach at the state level. (The approach is also being used by campuses, occasionally with great success as seen at Rutgers.)

Several key elements help define a blue-ribbon commission: 1) it is established to study a specific problem, 2) its existence is of fixed duration, 3) it is composed of eminent individuals from a variety of backgrounds, and 4) it is provided a staff and funds to fulfill its charge (Johnson & Marcus, 1986).

This definition excludes a number of active study commissions composed solely of legislative members or representatives of higher education institutions or agencies.

Some state-level commissions have a very narrowly defined mission. For instance, a commission in Arizona was impaneled to examine the feasibility of locating a branch campus in a particular town. At the other end of the spectrum from these single issue commissions, are those charged with a broad, sweeping mandate to study higher education and make suggestions for improvement.

Examples of a comprehensive charge given to some commissions are:

Maine: review the overall mission, goals, organization, financing, and program priorities of the University for the remainder of the century; review principle activities, processes by which it is governed, distinct missions and roles for each campus with the system, and current allocation of the system's financial resources and the opportunity to reallocate them better to meet the needs of Maine people.

Alabama: address the following basic questions--1) What are the principal problems and the major opportunities that face Alabama today and over the next decade? 2) What special responsibilities should higher education have in solving these problems or seizing these opportunities?

Michigan: recommend future needs for higher education in Michigan; the focus should be on the broad goals of the revitalization of Michigan while maintaining educational excellence; these recommendations should include statements about quality, diversity, access, affordability, institutional missions and program offerings and cover the 15 public baccalaureate colleges & universities, the 29 community and junior colleges, as well as their interaction with the 56 independent colleges and universities.

A blue-ribbon commission may be appointed to gain consensus for a major change, or to bring public attention to important issues, or deal with a crisis, whether actual or impending. Thus, the Michigan commission was created in an atmosphere of crisis and was expected to make recommendations for serious cutbacks in higher education, possibly closing one or more regional campuses, because of drastically reduced revenues from the ailing automobile industry. Fortunately for the commission, the auto industry showed some signs of improvement by the time the commission was underway and the onus of their task was dramatically reduced.

The state revenue crisis has now shifted from auto to oil dependent states, creating difficult conditions for higher education. A commission has just been appointed in New Mexico to recommend ways the colleges can cut costs. This is two commissions in a row for New Mexico. Recommendations from the first were not implemented.

The outsiders' viewpoint, which can look across institutions and speak to the health and interests of the system as a whole, is what is being sought in state after state. If crisis is not the special impetus, long-standing frustration with intercampus rivalries and unbounded ambitions can lead to an appeal for an "objective" review. Evidence of these problems seeps through even in what are extremely carefully worded documents. Thus, the Council of Twenty-One in Alabama bemoans (tactfully) the total lack of statewide planning and the dominant "narrow local

interests" which have dictated the system's present configuration and, in their view, assured its continued mediocrity. Similarly, other commissions hint at underlying tensions in their discussions of roles and missions, program duplication, and related issues.

Appointment of a blue ribbon commission can signal opportunity--an intent to act as well as an intent to delay. The best example of the former appears to be New Jersey. Under a very activist governor, New Jersey has lifted the blue-ribbon commission approach to an art form and all of these efforts have had big payoffs for higher education. One commission examined science and technology in New Jersey and focused their recommendations on ways to increase collaboration between business and industry and higher education researchers in order to promote economic development in the state. The commission's recommendations resulted in millions being set aside to establish centers of excellence at Rutgers and several other universities.

At the same time, Rutgers gathered its own prestigious blue-ribbon commission to draw attention to its desire to catapult itself to the rank of first-rate research universities. The Rutgers report became a blueprint for additional state appropriations. New Jersey has also developed a challenge grant program for the state colleges which were invited to make proposals for improvements to their undergraduate programs, submit them for review by a panel of experts, and the successful ones receive additional funding to carry out the projects.

All this activity has ushered in a new era of respectability for higher education in New Jersey and brought joy to the hearts of many long-suffering academics. In this case, the recommendations of the various blue-ribbon commissions were eagerly sought by the Governor and they have become a platform for his administration and provided him with a great deal of national visibility.

Effectiveness of Blue-Ribbon Commissions:

How effective are blue-ribbon commissions in accomplishing their difficult and often politically sensitive tasks? It is too early to assess systematically the effectiveness of the many commissions working since 1981, although there is already evidence of both success (New Jersey) and failure (New Mexico) in having Commission recommendations implemented by appropriate state officials and institutions.

Johnson (1986) conducted contrasting case studies of two commissions to identify the conditions and characteristics which seemed to the contribute to the ultimate effectiveness of the commissions. Effectiveness was defined as resulting in an immediate and recognizable change in the postsecondary structure, functions, or processes in the state. She found a number of factors which contributed to commission effectiveness: attainable goals and objectives, sufficient time to accomplish goals and complete the report, adequate number of meetings, accessibility of commission to persons wishing to comment, sufficient staff selected on the basis of merit, consideration of

testimony, use of experts, explanation of reasons and implications of recommendations contained in the final report, consideration of political potency of affected interests, and commissioners playing an active role in seeking implementation of recommendations (1986, pp. 78-79).

The commissions examined for this report varied on many dimensions--who or what body formed the commission and gave it its charge (governor, legislature, state agency); constituencies represented by the members; the number of staff; the length of time they functioned (several months to two years); the number of meetings they held; the number of staff available and the amount of background work conducted on behalf of the commission; and the extent of public and institutional involvement in the Commission deliberations. All of these variables as well as the perceived stature and credibility of the Commission members themselves will have an important impact on whether recommendations are implemented, debated, or ignored.

The remainder of this paper summarizes the results of a review of 26 reports produced by blue-ribbon commissions in 23 states between January 1981 and March 1986. Recommendations from these reports were classified into similar issue areas and the most frequent recommendations are discussed in the findings section. Finally, a brief summary of Maryland's past and current experience with blue-ribbon commissions is provided as an advance warning to those who anticipate a blue-ribbon commission in their state.

METHOD

Content analysis was selected as the appropriate methodology for two reasons: 1) It allowed the researchers to make consistent classifications of recommendations without interference of others' interpretation, and 2) it was the most appropriate methodology for dealing with primary source documents.

The steps in conducting content analysis for this study were typical (Kidder, 1981):

1) choose the phenomenon to be studied: In this case, the recommendations put forth by various blue-ribbon commissions constituted the phenomenon.

2) determine the documents to be examined: The timeliness of the subject matter all but dictated the use of primary documents, the reports themselves, obtained by mail and telephone solicitation and through the ERIC system.

3) select the coding categories: The coding categories used in the 1986 study by DiBiasio (1986) were judged to be a useful starting point; several categories were expanded to accommodate the data, and a few other were collapsed.

4) decide the sample: All reports termed "study commissions" in the ECS draft report "Major State Higher Education Studies 1980 to Present" (McGuinness, 1986 (a)) and completed since 1981 were used.

5) present the data: Simple percentages and numbers of frequencies were selected as indication of content of recommendations and trends in recommendations.

SELECTED FINDINGS

The general summary of the findings of this review are presented in Table 1. This table lists the number and percent of recommendations falling in each category.

Insert Table 1 About Here

The largest number of recommendations concerned governance (105) and finance (103). Most governance recommendations reaffirmed the existing structure or suggested minor changes. Arkansas, for instance, reaffirmed that each institution continue to have its own board of trustees and that local decision making should be further strengthened, not weakened. Other states recommended greater state control and coordination. The North Dakota commission recommended that the three community colleges be brought under state governance and that the State Board for Higher Education and the State Board for Vocational Education be replaced by a new constitutional board in order to improve coordination of higher education. The Alabama commission called for greater authority for the State Board and Connecticut recommended replacing its coordinating board with a governing board.

TABLE 1

CLASSIFICATION AND FREQUENCY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

OF BLUE RIBBON COMMISSIONS

Rank	Category	N	% Total
1.	Governance	105	15.1
2.	Finance	103	14.8
3.	Coop. with Business/Industry Economic Development	74	10.6
4.	Role and Mission/Size and Scope	70	10.0
5.	Student Costs/Financial Aid	65	9.3
6.	Programs/Curriculum Program Review	57	8.2
7.	Recruitment/Admissions/Retention	37	5.3
8.	Faculty Development	34	4.9
9.	Faculty Salaries	25	3.6
10.	Facilities	24	3.4
11.	Affirmative Action	20	2.9
11.	Coop. with other Coll/Univ.	20	2.9
13.	Quality/Incentives for Quality	17	2.4
14.	Teacher Education	15	2.2
15.	Student Assessment	12	1.7
16.	Faculty Evaluation	10	1.4
17.	General	9	1.3
	Total	697	100.0

The majority of financial recommendations dealt with examination of funding formulas and/or asked for an increase in the amount of money appropriated to higher education in that state. Typical of these recommendations was a call to establish an inter-organization committee "to review the technical aspects of suggestions for changes relating to the effective and efficient budgeting of higher education" in Washington state. Greater flexibility in budgeting and financial management was a special concern in the Maryland and New York reports.

Institutional role and mission and size and scope of the higher education system were important issues for many commissions (70). Size and Scope recommendations were often related to number of campuses or institutions and number of students enrolled at individual campuses while recommendations related to Roles and Missions often called for greater clarification of institutional roles and missions. In Idaho, the commission found that two roles assigned to Boise State University and Idaho State University--vocational and associate degree programs as well as a university mission--were in conflict and made it difficult to achieve high quality in either. Michigan also dealt with the role and mission problem and urged greater clarification in order to control proliferation of expensive graduate programs.

Cooperation with business and industry and economic development (74) occupied the deliberations of many commissions. Recommendations focused on ways to encourage technology transfer,

to promote industry-oriented research, to meet needs for skilled manpower, and to link business and industry with educational institutions to the benefit of both.

Another large area of interest was in student costs and financial aid (65). The vast majority of recommendations were toward increasing financial aid programs and maintaining student costs as low as possible.

Admissions standards and recruitment and retention programs were the target of 37 recommendations. Most recommendations on admissions suggested raising standards with a goal of raising quality. Student assessment was the topic of only 12 recommendations.

Faculty were another concern. Recommendations on increasing faculty salaries appeared 25 times, and statements urging faculty development programs and/or addressing tenure issues appeared 32 times. The tenure proposals recommended examination of the system but generally stopped short of attempting to recommend elimination of tenure. Only ten recommendations dealt with faculty evaluation, and these were very general in nature, such as the Arkansas recommendation to monitor promotion and evaluation procedures.

Another interest area was the condition of facilities (24). These recommendations related to buildings in general, libraries, and equipment, especially computers and scientific laboratory equipment. Recommendations were aimed at enabling institutions to be responsive to changing technology by upgrading equipment

and in several cases addressed the problem of accumulated deferred maintenance projects and general deterioration of facilities.

Program review as a specific activity to be delegated or expanded was the subject of 20 recommendations. Most recommendations on this subject called for review at institutional and state levels to eliminate duplication and increase efficient use of state funding.

Encouraging cooperation with other colleges and universities to reduce costs and expand services was recommended 20 times. These recommendations generally asked for task groups to be study cooperation or simply urged greater cooperation. For instance, the Florida Board of Regents was urged to assess the Joint-Use Facility Program to determine whether this method of providing space could be expanded to realize greater savings.

Surprisingly, teacher education received little attention in these particular reports: only 15 recommendations dealt with it in any way. Quality as a specific recommendation with any focus also did not rank high; only 17 recommendations had specific quality or quality incentive dimensions, although improvements in quality were the underlying goals in many other recommendations.

DISCUSSION

A general comment on the tone of the recommendations might be of interest here. Many of the recommendations were so

carefully worded so as to offend no one. Others demonstrate the frustration with the process of implementing the committee's work: "The Committee recommends the recommendations in this report be adopted by the legislature and the executive branch."

With exceptions such as New Jersey and Virginia, few of the commissions aggressively addressed the questions related to links between postsecondary education and economic development in the state. Recommendations tended to be standard: develop manpower to respond to state needs, use business and industry facilities, retain the better students for training within the state.

Another anticipated finding was the lack of interest in teacher training. Since many of these reports were preceded by reports on K-12 education, the lack of attention to the quality of teacher preparedness or the predicted shortage in critical areas may be logical. Additionally, there was little emphasis on the importance of teachers to the overall quality of education in the state.

While this summary of recommendations of 26 commissions over the last five years provides some insight into major issues and concerns confronting states across the country, it does not provide an assessment of the effectiveness of blue-ribbon commissions as a mechanism for statewide planning for higher education. Clearly, the next step is to follow up on the fate of various commission reports to see if they were met with enthusiasm or hostility and whether recommendations were considered and implemented.

We already know that some reports became a blueprint for immediate action (as in the case of New Jersey and the first Maryland report) and that others are completely ignored (New Mexico). Thus the range of responses is already established, but the modal response is still undetermined and the overall appropriateness and effectiveness of blue-ribbon commissions left unassessed. In the next section, a brief history of Maryland's experience with blue-ribbon commissions raises many questions about their potential to effect major change and to resolve long standing problems.

MARYLAND'S COMMISSIONS

Maryland has a long history of executive-level created commissions charged with studying education. The first was the Griswold-Flexner Commission of 1914, that examined the public school system (Callcott, 1986). Since then, Maryland has had 10 additional commissions, an average of one every seven years. However, the history of education in the State does not reflect results of these commission deliberations since most of the recommendations have not been implemented. In addition, there have been several task forces charged with studying a previous commission's recommendations, usually resulting in a set of recommendations diametrically opposed to the first. For example, in the 1920s, Flexner was commissioned to follow up his public school study with recommendations for public colleges. Flexner demonstrated that Maryland ranked the lowest among the states in providing support for higher education (Maryland currently ranks an improved 37th). Since those were the times of the glorification of private enterprise, the then governor Ritchie charged another commission to come up with findings which supported the status quo in Maryland: good private colleges in Maryland fulfilling the needs of the citizens. That commission concluded that the state need not invest any more in public higher education (Callcott, 1986). Along the same vein, the more recent Rosenberg commission thoroughly researched and energetically recommended a restructuring of higher education in Maryland. In response, a legislative task force was immediately

created to digest those recommendations and to modify them into more politically palatable changes.

Such political dimensions to Commission reports are not unusual in modern times nor unique to Maryland. New Mexico's governor recently commissioned a group to study higher education. When that commission presented its report, the legislature displayed a vote of no confidence in the governor by commissioning its own task force (Roark, 1986).

There are those who would argue that there can never be enough scrutiny of higher education, that the more attention the better. But for the institutions who must respond to requests for information and prepare testimonies, the process is exhausting. In the case of the most recent commission in Maryland, some general comments are telling.

In the most recent request, the Commission asked for 36 reports from each institutional segment. The subject of these reports ranged from reviews of the literature on financial incentives for quality to faculty workload studies. These requests followed the already prepared and delivered testimony and associated campus tours which themselves had consumed months of preparation. In addition, at each of the public hearings, specific questions arose, and written responses from the segments had to be forwarded to the Commission staff. Over the eight months of public testimony for the current commission, it is estimated that the University of Maryland alone has generated

over 2000 pages of final form information. The implications for staff time and effort are enormous.

Why should an institution or segment commit time and effort to the commission process which has traditionally been at best non-productive? The immediate responses are predictable: there is no way to refuse to respond and there is always the hope that favorable recommendations will be implemented. Unfortunately, the outcomes are not known until long after the time investment has been made.

While the University hopes that the State will at least make a substantial commitment to public higher education by improving its funding, much will depend on the political climate which is simply unknown. The Maryland Commission was the brainchild of the Speaker of the House who was considering a bid for the gubernatorial seat. While he is still an active participant on the Commission, the Speaker has chosen to run for the U.S. Senate instead, and the Commission's report no longer has the potential of becoming a platform for a new governor who was an integral part of the deliberations. The Commission's report is expected some time this fall; at the same time a new governor will be elected. Clearly, the fate of the Commission's recommendations in Maryland, where the Governor sets the budget, will depend on the interest and priority the new governor accords higher education and the extent to which the Commission's recommendations offer him/her an acceptable blueprint for change.

APPENDIX

LIST OF REPORTS REVIEWED

Alabama

The Council of Twenty-One. "Challenge Obligation Opportunity: The Imperative for Excellence in Higher Education." July 1983.

Arkansas

The Quality Higher Education Study Committee. "Quality Development in Higher Education to Meet the Future Needs of Arkansas." October 1984.

California

Commission for the Review of the Master Plan for Higher Education. "The Challenge of Change: A Reassessment of the California Community Colleges." March 1986.

Colorado

Higher Education Committee. "Report to the Colorado General Assembly." January 1985.

Connecticut

The Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education and the Economy of Connecticut, Inc. "Report of the Governor's Commission on Higher Education and the Economy." January 1982.

Florida

Regents Study Commission on Funding for Excellence. "A Path to Excellence in Public Higher Education in Florida." January 1985.

Georgia

Study Commission on Public Higher Education Finance. "Formula for Excellence: Financing Georgia's University System in the '80s." September 1982.

Idaho

Idaho Task Force on Higher Education. "Higher Education in Idaho: A Plan for the Future." November 1983.

Kentucky

Council on Higher Education. "Prichard Committee on Higher Education in Kentucky's Future: Final Report." October 1981.

Maine

Visiting Committee to the University of Maine. "Report." January 1986.

Maryland

Task Force to Study Flexibility for Higher Education. "Report." January 1984.

Michigan

Governor's Commission on the Future of Higher Education in Michigan. "Putting Our Minds Together: New Directions for Michigan Higher Education." December 1984.

Minnesota

Task Force on the Future Funding of Postsecondary Education. "Final Report." December 1982.

Governor's Commission on the Future of Postsecondary Education in Minnesota. "Postsecondary Education in Minnesota: A Commitment to Quality, Access, and Diversity." April 1984.

Nebraska

Citizens Commission for the Study of Higher Education in Nebraska. "Toward the 21st Century." December 1984.

New Jersey

Commission on the Future of the State Colleges. "Toward a University of New Jersey." February 1984.

"Report of the Governor's Commission on Science and Technology." December 1983.

New Mexico

Governor's Commission on Higher Education. "The Future is Excellence." December 1983.

New York

Independent Commission on the Future of the State University. "The State University of New York: The Challenge and the Choice." January 16, 1985.

North Carolina

Commission on the Future of North Carolina. "The Future of North Carolina: Goals and Recommendations for the Year 2000." 1984.

Governor's Task Force on Science and Technology. "New Challenges for a New Era: Progress through Innovation, Education, and Research in Ncrth Carolina." 4 volumes. January 1984.

North Dakota

Higher Education Study Commission. "Final Report." 1983.

Pennsylvania

Governor's Commission on the Financing of Higher Education. "Final Report." 1985.

Virginia

Governor's Commission on Virginia's Future. "Toward a New Dominion." December 1984.

Washington

Washington State Temporary Committee on Educational Policies, Structure, and Management. "The Paramount Duty." January 1985.

West Virginia

Benedum Study Project. "Revitalization and Renewal." October 1984.

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